

**Opening Remarks by
H.E. Mr. Vijavat Isarabhakdi
Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs of Thailand
at the Inaugural “Thailand Focus” Webinar Series
Thursday, 10 September 2020, 19.30-20.45 hrs.**

*Your Excellency, Mr. Michael DeSombre, Ambassador of the United States to Thailand,
Distinguished Speakers,
Honourable Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

Good evening from Bangkok and a very good morning to those in the United States. It is my great pleasure to deliver the opening remarks at this inaugural session of the “Thailand Focus” Webinar Series. Let me begin by thanking all the representatives from government agencies, the private sector, think-tanks and academic institutions for joining us from near and far. I would also like to express my appreciation to Ambassador Thani and his team at the Royal Thai Embassy in Washington for initiating and hosting this virtual webinar, which is certainly timely, as all of us continue to adapt to the “New Normal”.

We are honoured to be joined today by a special guest speaker, Ambassador Michael DeSombre, who has been playing a very active role in promoting Thai-U.S. cooperation, including potential collaboration with the U.S. private sector to support Thailand’s post-pandemic economic recovery. My sincere appreciation also goes to our esteemed panelists, Dr. Tanarak Plipat (พลีพัฒน์) from the Ministry of Public Health and Dr. Pisit Puapan from the Ministry of Finance, who have both been directly involved in Thailand’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the public health and economic aspects. Given the impressive line-up of speakers, I am certain that this inaugural webinar will be a productive one, and will offer many useful insights and ideas for all participants.

*Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

As a former Thai Ambassador to Washington, I am pleased that Thailand and the United States continue to enjoy very special ties. Ours is not only a close, dynamic, and mutually beneficial relationship, but also one that is resilient and always rises to new challenges.

The COVID-19 situation is certainly a case in point. While the pandemic may have created difficulties for our regular exchange of visits and meetings, we were still able to facilitate the significant visit of General James McConville, Chief of

Staff of the U.S. Army, in July this year as well as the arrival of more than 300 U.S. diplomats and their family members since March.

Furthermore, our dialogue still continues unimpeded. Earlier today, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai joined his ASEAN counterparts in a productive meeting with Secretary Pompeo at the ASEAN-U.S. Ministerial Meeting, which, in adapting to the New Normal, was held completely online.

Like other countries, the Thai and U.S. economies have been facing multiple challenges from COVID-19. In Thailand's case, the travel restrictions have taken a toll on our tourism industry, which accounts for over 20 percent of our GDP and employs around 12 percent of the total workforce. Thailand's GDP contracted from 1.8 percent in the first quarter of this year to minus 12.2 percent in the second quarter.

Nevertheless, every cloud has a silver lining. In this case, we find that trade between Thailand and the United States has been minimally affected. During the first seven months of this year, our total trade value decreased by a mere 1.04 percent compared to last year, and it has in fact been on a gradual rebound, increasing by 14.67 percent in June and 17.47 percent in July. Such is the strength of our economic ties.

*Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

Much has been written about Thailand's effective handling of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as our economic resilience. I believe this can be attributed to a number of factors. To start off, our country has been successful in developing a strong healthcare system and in striking a delicate balance between disease control and economic recovery. The Johns Hopkins University's 2019 Global Health Security Index ranked Thailand as the world's sixth best prepared country and the best in Asia for confronting the pandemic, while the Global COVID-19 Index ranks Thailand first among those with the highest COVID-19 recovery. As a result, foreign companies in Thailand were able to continue their businesses, facilitated by an uninterrupted supply chain, even at the height of the pandemic.

As an important part of global and regional supply chains, Thailand enjoys economic fundamentals that remain strong and competitive. This includes our strategic location in ASEAN and the Mekong Sub-region as well as our well-connected road, air, and sea infrastructure. We are proud to be hosting, at present, over 700 American companies and we continue to appreciate the U.S. private sector's valuable contribution to our economic development.

Our success thus far in handling the COVID-19 pandemic and the encouraging signs of recovery notwithstanding, Thailand is aware that the path ahead will be long and uncertain. Many countries still grapple with the COVID-19 situation and many of those that have successfully addressed the pandemic are now seeing its recurrence. While we remain hopeful that a cure for this disease is forthcoming, it is likely to take some time for prospective vaccines to be fully tested and ready for distribution.

Like the old adage “a friend in need is a friend indeed”, the ongoing global pandemic is a time when friendships are most valuable. The pandemic poses a common challenge that no country can overcome alone. It also highlights the importance of a strong partnership between Thailand and the United States as we work closely together to mitigate the socio-economic impact caused by COVID-19. And I am certain that we are well placed to face up to any challenges that lie ahead of us.

*Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

Before I conclude, please allow me to offer some final thoughts on how Thailand and the United States can work together in moving forward our cooperation amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

First, we should explore ways to draw on each other’s strengths and our well-established cooperation in public health. In particular, this year marks the 40th anniversary of the fruitful cooperation between the Thai Ministry of Public Health and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control that has benefited our peoples and others in the region. The question we must now ask ourselves is “How do we build on this success to address the COVID-19 pandemic and other communicable diseases in the future?” And “How can the Thai and U.S. private sectors play a greater role in this endeavour, such as through vaccine development and other recovery treatments as well as by grooming new generations of medical professionals and researchers?”

Second, as we work closely together to revive our economies, there are various existing ideas and initiatives that we can further explore. This includes, for example, identifying winner industries that emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic in parallel with supporting other sectors of the economies to attain full and fast economic recovery for both our countries.

In this connection, the 2nd Indo-Pacific Business Forum in Bangkok last year was a good example of how the governments and private sectors of both Thailand and the United States have worked together to promote future economic cooperation. The

meeting has pointed out ample business opportunities in the region that would answer to the needs on the ground and are in line with our government priorities, including initiatives under the U.S. Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy. We should therefore ponder on how to further translate those ideas and inputs into concrete outcomes that are beneficial for both sides, especially in these challenging times.

I believe that with their knowledge and expertise, Dr. Tanarak Plipat and Dr. Pisit Puapan would be able to help shed some light on these questions. At the same time, we certainly welcome inputs from our participants that would add depth and dimension to our discussions as we continue our exchanges on those timely issues.

Once again, I wish this event every success and I thank you for your attention.
